

Failed Yet Successful - Learning from Discontinued Civic Tech Initiatives
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Position Statement

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The CHI23 workshop on *Discontinued Civic Tech Initiatives*, initiated and organised by Andrea Hamm (Berlin) and Yuya Shibuya (Tokyo), problematises the different factors that lead such projects and initiatives to end without tangible results, or with different results than anticipated, or with such intangible results of mutual learning, community formation, prototyping or simply networking, which are often difficult to map on standard impact and performance indicators. The emphasis on 'failure' in the workshop proposal seeks to open up a space of exchange and learning about such initiatives, where 'failure' as such can be critically assessed and its potential benefits be harnessed in terms of institutional learning, long-term developments or revised approaches. While opening the space of discussion to share such experiences, the organisers hope to identify common patterns of 'failure' and factors that can help to achieve both more realistic and more robust developments of civic tech approaches and their role in civic communication, education and governance. The approach is thus inclusive of failure as a productive and creative part of learning processes while keeping in mind the local aspirations of civic tech approaches in their respective settings and given objectives.

The purpose of this position statement is to frame the coming debates and case examples through five theses on impediments to civic tech approaches (sometimes also summarised as 'digital civics'). Civic technologies and the actors who develop them, I want to argue, fill a gap between the widespread use of digital technologies in *personal* everyday life (as networked, mobile, federated, personalised resources) and the apparent lack or deficiency of *public* digital services, which are deployed at very unequal levels of accessibility and maturity across Europe and Japan (See: Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) by the European Commission, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi> or the Digital Adoption Index by the World Bank,

Adoption-Index). Civic tech approaches open up new constellations of actors to join resources and ideas to reinvent society and the means of its solidarity – across areas of expertise, domains and also antagonisms. The group of organisers and participants shows a high level of interdisciplinarity, diversity of educational backgrounds and different histories and experiences in the field. Most of them come from the EMEA region and Japan, highlighting a joint interest in civic tech as both a critical practice and a future-minded approach to reformulating democratic objectives for the networked age.

From my perspective as a researcher and teacher in digital technologies, journalism and the changing paradigms of publics, this interdisciplinary constellation is a risky terrain to navigate but equally liberating. It is risky to engage in debates outside of your own discipline and its own legacies as much as it is liberating to shed the disciplinary frame for a problem-focused and interdisciplinary discussion to change the conditions of knowledge and learning across domains: from academic theory to practice, from activism and critical theorising to infrastructuring for new kinds of publics. Let's confront the risks of leaving your (academic) comfort zone and the liberties to be inspired together in this workshop.

Here are my five theses for civic tech to thrive (+ bonus track):

1) Avoid Narratives of Crisis and Uncertain Future(s)

The future is always uncertain, and unknowable as such. What has changed in our connected age is the awareness and knowledge of impending risks and the multiple options available to mitigate them. Real crises such as global pandemics, health risks, and climate change are addressed by multiple actors worldwide. Measures and reports are issued, policies adopted and effects in the everyday lives of citizens are felt gradually or abruptly. The language of crisis, though, draws attention to the exceptional, the dangers and threats to order, feeding into an aggravating perception of society as hostile to individual well-being. The language of crisis also nurtures the journalistic news values of negativity, while many productive and innovative developments remain unnoticed. There are and have been promises of futures led by technology, where citizens appear as empowered, societal problems are 'managed' and efficient deployment of scarce resources is ensured. But between the marketing speak of futures optimised through technology and the realities of 'future avoiding' in their actual implementation, as Leah Horgan has called it (2022), are great opportunities for civic tech approaches to gather communities around issues of shared concern and develop the means to address them, with or without technologies. *A language of crisis does not help to empower citizens*

to deal with the very crises that they will need to confront. But building trust in a joint effort, explaining and testing available resources across generations and interest groups, can build resilience inside a community and beyond, to serve as an example for others to emulate.

2) Media Practice of Connected Publics

We cope with in a constant onslaught of communications, facilitated by global networks and uniform standards for handling information, using handheld devices and seemingly endless opportunities of connection. But as much as this new environment provides opportunities, it risks to conflate articulation and visibility with importance in public discourse. The old gatekeepers of the press are less important to trigger and stir public debates. The new gatekeepers such as social media platforms operate on different business logics that are perceived as threats to the freedom of expression and individual liberty (Botero and Griffin 2023). Issues are abundant and publics form spontaneously-every day. But these publics are also ephemeral, less capable to shape the means that they can to some degree also govern in the long term. Design becomes important as a 'democratic' practice of enabling participation and engagement (DiSalvo 2009), as a mode of 'inquiry' into the conditions of solidarity and joint action (DiSalvo 2022). The broader implications of an "audience turn" (Swart et al. 2022) in research on political communication, journalism and social media are just emerging on the horizon. But the practices of audiences as citizens and as stakeholders in issues of public concern (Raetzsch and Lünenborg 2020) are of vital importance for the field of civic tech to become a practice of engagement in a political sense. Being connected through information and communication is only the beginning. Collaborating on a joint effort with the means of digital technologies engenders a very different sense of being a citizen and contributing to a public. *Civic tech initiatives can facilitate this learning process and instil new confidence in emerging modes of engagement, even when they fail or end, or rely only on means that are available in everyday contexts.*

3) Experimentation is not for everyone

Design processes require openness to unexpected results while they have to be managed and often need to meet instrumental objectives. Within a hierarchical culture or organisation, such openness needs explanation to build trust. Both in Japan and in Germany, public authorities are expected to deliver solutions that work, but their internal organisation expects leadership to stir and direct, and in the end assume full responsibility for 'failure'. The colleagues from CityLab Berlin have put together a remarkable manual on "Public Design" [öffentliches Gestalten] (Paulick-Thiel et al. 2020), where they speak as much

about the required cultural change inside public administrations as much as exemplifying design and change processes through concrete and approachable methodologies. Openness to experimentation needs to be learned and supported from the leadership level. Design approaches and experimentation are not for everyone a means of choice to tackle wicked problems. From an academic perspective, we can look at “failure as an endemic feature of technology”, as Jathan Sadowski does in his study of (failed) development of urban dashboards in Australia (2021: 4). We adopt the lens of Star and Ruhleder’s ecology of infrastructure which “becomes visible upon breakdown” (Star and Ruhleder 1996: 113). But for practitioners in the field, infrastructure has to work at some point and we need to acknowledge that failure also has its limits as a productive factor in learning and development. The Scandinavian traditions of participatory design (Björgvinsson et al. 2012; Binder et al. 2011; Bjerknes, Ehn, Kyng 1987) where envisioned as democratic interventions, as *continuous* efforts to engage users of technology in their design and implementation. The current wave of smartness discourses risks to sell out these promises to quick fixes while it should generate a new way of working with technological change (Baykurt and Raetzsch 2020). *Civic Tech approaches can foster experimental and inclusive practices of design, exploring the liberty of failure and design without being fully entangled with the institutional logics of change management. Civic Tech thus helps to nurture the necessary cultural change that installs experimentation-at-scale (Brynskov et al. 2018) as a capacity of resilience, without being itself institutionalised or being held accountable for ‘failure’ that is still part of a communal learning process.*

4) Disruptive Innovation or Care through Maintenance?

It is fashionable to regard innovation as disruptive, following the ethos and spirit of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, embodied in the ‘Californian Ideology’ (Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Streeter 2017) that builds digital platforms and entire data infrastructures which impact societies, politics and economies globally. But as Lee Vinsel and Andrew Russell remind us in their book “The Innovation Delusion” (2020) the work of maintenance and care are equally or even more important for societies to continue to function. Every day is a repair day, every day new resources need to be provided for processes to continue. For civic tech initiatives, community orientation and bottom-up approaches to innovation create artefacts and durable networks across projects that respond to shared political concerns. *The disruption has already happened, you could say, whether it concerns gig economies, energy and climate crises, cybersecurity or the toxic climate of fake news and disinformation. Countering such trends in constructive, inclusive and technology-driven approaches puts civic tech initiatives at the forefront of a*

democratic innovation that is precisely not disruptive but oriented to care and maintenance for current and future generations.

5) Civic Tech, Digital Civics, or Infrastructures of Publics?

The movements and initiatives we discuss under civic tech and digital civics comprise very heterogeneous topics, constellations of actors and goals (LeDantec 2019). Some are driven by community concerns and some act as crucial elements in institutional innovation efforts. But beyond the definitions of terms and the proliferation of concepts in this domain, there is a broader – common – shift to address infrastructures as vital elements in our thinking and practice of maintaining societies and developing new forms of engagement with them. I would like to frame this shift as a negotiation between interfaces and infrastructures of publics, because processes of articulation, networking and institutionalisation map onto a field of accessibility of resources that ultimately have “Gemeinwohl”, “公益 [kōeki]”, or the “common good” as their objective. This framing of interfaces and infrastructures enables new kinds of joint and collaborative endeavours between research and practice, between design and engagement, between politics and technological development. It is also a productive frame for education of students and practitioners that situates universities, research institutions and civil society actors around ‘real-world’ issues in ‘real-world’ settings. *Civic Tech can demonstrate the value of engaged and critical research for society, creating infrastructures of publics on multiple levels that become available for problems we have not yet encountered.*

Bonus Track: Academic Research and the Limits of Disciplines

The organisers and participants of this workshop demonstrate that civic tech matters across disciplines and approaches. In a highly networked research and learning environment, disciplinary boundaries matter less for a particular object to become a matter of shared concern. While disciplines helped to build the bodies of knowledge that we draw on, the requirements to translate disciplinary knowledge into actionable information reshape the role of research and expertise fundamentally. Not every researcher is comfortable with this development or well equipped to participate. We are also locking important research in inaccessible language and behind publisher paywalls. *Civic Tech approaches reposition the researcher as a moderator of processes, as a community facilitator and a networker of knowledge. This is a risk and a liberty, and it takes courage to embrace ‘failure’ before you thrive.*

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